

session 11: choosing healthy relationships

You've experienced many kinds of relationships in your life – friendships, family relationships, teacher-student relationships, and so on. When it comes to romantic relationships, there is probably tremendous variation among your peers. Some people have been dating for a while, while others haven't even thought about it.

It's normal for people to have had different levels of experience with romantic relationships. Each person is an individual with different interests, personalities, family and cultural backgrounds.

Regardless of your personal experience, working through this section of the student workbook will increase your awareness of what's involved in creating healthy relationships. It will also help you to be more aware of the things that are important to you. This is information you might be able to apply in your life right now...or you might store it away and put it to use later.

What Makes a Relationship Healthy?

What do you think are the characteristics of a healthy relationship? Rate the following list of characteristics of a healthy dating relationship. Put a check somewhere on the line beside each characteristic to indicate how important you think it is.

CHARACTERISTIC:	Not Important	Very Important
Open and easy communication		
Accept each other as they are		
Look out for each other's best interests		
Mutual trust		
Mutual respect		
Similar values		
Similar goals		
Have fun together		
Physical affection		
Can work out problems and conflicts respectfully		
Can give each other space		

How would these characteristics be different if you were thinking about what makes a marriage healthy?

What characteristics do you think are more important in a marriage than in a dating relationship?

Relationship experts say that commitment and faithfulness are important in a marriage. Do an Internet search to find out what research says about the impact of commitment and faithfulness on marriage. Provide a short summary below.

Commitment:

Faithfulness:

Building Relationship Skills

Marriage and family therapists tell us that many marriages and committed relationships break up because couples don't know how to communicate effectively and don't know how to manage conflict.

The good news is that communication and conflict resolution are skills that can be learned and practiced. By working together, a couple can learn the relationship skills to build and maintain a healthy relationship.

You don't need to be in a romantic relationship to work on your communication or conflict resolution skills. Being able to communicate and work out conflicts respectfully will help you at home, with friends, at school and on the job.

A Communication Exercise:

This simple communication exercise can enhance communication between a couple.

Practice role playing this exercise with a friend so you'll remember how to do it, then try using this technique the next time you are discussing something important with someone in your life. Hint: It's especially useful when you are disagreeing about something.

Follow these directions:

1. Partner A makes a statement (what s/he thinks, what s/he feels, what s/he wants, etc.).
Pointers: Keep it short. Speak for yourself only—don't assume you know what the other person thinks or feels.
2. Partner B listens carefully to partner A.
Pointers: Don't interrupt. Focus on your partner's message.
3. Partner B repeats back to partner A what they heard and asks if what they heard was correct. *Pointers: Stick to what you heard. Wait for your turn to give your point of view.*
4. Partner A either confirms or corrects.

EXAMPLE:

(A) Mary: I feel hurt when you flirt with other girls. It makes me think you don't want to be with me.

(B) Joe: So you believe I don't love you when I look at other women?

(A) Mary: Yes, even if it's silly, that's how it makes me feel.

(B) Joe: Well, I'm glad you told me. It really means nothing when I look at other women. I'll try to curb the looking, but remember that I'm choosing to be with you, not them!

(A) Mary: I appreciate your trying to do that for me.

Guidelines for Managing Conflict

Here are some important things to know about conflict in relationships:

- All relationships have some conflict. Conflict in and of itself is not bad – it's how we react to the conflict that can be negative or destructive.
- However, too much conflict is bad. It creates a negative environment for adults in the relationship, and it's especially unhealthy for any children that are in the picture.
- It's OK and normal to have conflict as long as you have some skills and strategies to work through the conflict.
- It's important for people in a serious romantic relationship or marriage to do positive things for one another and to build a foundation of positive feelings. This way, when conflicts do arise, they don't suck all the energy out of the relationship.

Here are some ways to manage conflict:

- **Prevent it from happening in the first place.**
 - Be respectful. When you have a problem with something the person is doing, voice a complaint rather than a criticism. Consider the following:
 - Complaint:** *I get uncomfortable when you talk to your friends about the details of our relationship.*
 - Criticism:** *What is wrong with you? Can't you keep anything between us? You're always telling what we talk about and what we do. I'm never telling you anything important again!*
 - Avoid name-calling, blaming, put-downs or using the words 'always' and 'never'.
 - Avoid being defensive or "flipping the script" (sidestepping or changing the topic) if your boyfriend/girlfriend voices a complaint.
 - Use good listening skills. Make sure that you understand what each other is saying, especially when discussing a difficult issue.
 - Build a foundation of positive feelings with one another. Tell each other what you appreciate. Look out for each other. Strive to have more positive than negative interaction.
- **Manage the conflict when it does happen.**
 - When you catch yourself being defensive, overly critical or blaming, stop.
 - Do something to change the tone of an argument or to reduce the intensity; for example, hold up two fingers as a peace sign.
 - Soften what you're saying to make it sound less hostile.
 - De-brief the conflict.
 - Sit down and talk after an argument.
 - Take responsibility for your role in the problem.
 - Discuss what both of you can do to make it better in the future.

Interview With A Married Couple

You may or may not have many married couples in your life. Think about it for a minute. Who do you know that seems happily married? This does not mean that their marriage is perfect – no marriage is perfect. Think of some people who have a marriage that seems to be working.

Identify another married couple with a child/children to interview. This will be an informal interview. You won't need to take any notes, and you won't be asked to discuss any specific information in class.

Interview Questions:

- How and when did you decide to get married? How did you know you'd found the right person?
- What do you think needs to be in place in a marriage before having children?